

# THE FAILURE OF REGULATORY IMPACT ASSESSMENT REFORM IN GEORGIA: An Isomorphic Mimicry Perspective

Giorgi Khishtovani 

Ph.D. in Economics, Professor, School of Business, Technology and Education,  
Ilia State University, Georgia

 [giorgi.khishtovani@iliauni.edu.ge](mailto:giorgi.khishtovani@iliauni.edu.ge)

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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**Abstract.** Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) has been promoted globally as a cornerstone of good governance, designed to ensure evidence-based policymaking and enhance state accountability. In Georgia, multiple international donors supported the institutionalization of RIA from the mid-2000s onward. Despite the enactment of legal and methodological frameworks, the reform did not yield a functioning national system and, by 2024, had effectively collapsed, abandoned by both donors and the government. This paper examines why a globally celebrated instrument failed in an ostensibly favourable context. Using a process-tracing case study of Georgia, the paper employs the concept of Isomorphic Mimicry to show how donor-endorsed reforms can persist as performative compliance – securing resources and external legitimacy – while producing limited outcomes. In this effort, the article showcases how, in parallel with its formal adoption into law, the reform fell into a “capability trap”, with civil servants overloaded and donor-driven technical support proliferating. Thus, the case illustrates how mimicry-driven reform can persist for years without achieving substantive results, sustained by a coalition of political actors, donors, and other stakeholders with short-term incentives. The analysis further traces how political-bureaucratic actors preserved prevailing routines by designing and exploiting legislative loopholes that circumscribed RIA’s formal effects. This study advances Isomorphic Mimicry and governance reform scholarship by specifying conditions sustaining mimicry (particularly, high donor density, a well-developed system of external and internal reform enablers, and bureaucratic hedging via legislative loopholes), tracing regulatory decoupling that turns RIA into box-ticking, and using Georgia’s donor-cooperation suspension as a stress test highlighting the centrality of donors in mimetic reforms.

**KEYWORDS:** REGULATORY IMPACT ASSESSMENT (RIA), GOOD GOVERNANCE, ISOMORPHIC MIMICRY, INSTITUTIONAL ISOMORPHISM, GEORGIA.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the mid-2010s, introducing good governance principles became a priority for the Georgian government and its international development partners (European Commission, 2015; European Commission, 2017).<sup>1</sup> The framework within which Good Governance was to be established in the country was the Public Administration Reform (PAR).<sup>2</sup> The Coordination of the reform was entrusted to the Government Administration, while the unit with direct responsibility became the Department of Policy Analysis and Strategic Planning, established in 2014.<sup>3</sup> In 2015, under the coordination of this same unit, the Public Administration Reform Guide 2020 was adopted, drawing primarily on the SIGMA Principles.<sup>4</sup>

In parallel, by decree of the Prime Minister of Georgia, a strategy governing the activities of the new unit – the Policy Planning System Reform Strategy 2015-2017 (Strategy) – was enacted in 2015. It is noteworthy that, within the situational analysis of the Policy Planning System Reform Strategy 2015-2017, it was stated that the links between policy planning and legislative drafting in Georgia were weak. It was also underscored as a serious problem that Georgia had not introduced a practice of legislative impact assessment. Accordingly, the Strategy envisaged the introduction of a legislative impact assessment system to minimize potential negative effects on citizens, businesses, trade, and investment. It further set the objective that legislative impact assessment should become an integral component of the policy development and decision-making process (Policy Planning System Reform Strategy 2015-2017, 2015). Fol-

lowing this development, starting from 2015, the Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) instrument emerged in Georgia within the broader framework of Good Governance and PAR. Accordingly, among the various initiatives launched under PAR, attention has been devoted to the institutionalization of Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA).<sup>5</sup>

Despite significant efforts and the formal adoption of the relevant law and methodology, the reform never resulted in the creation of a functioning national framework in Georgia. By 2024, the RIA initiative had effectively collapsed, abandoned both by the government and the donors. This experience, therefore, raises a fundamental question: why did a globally celebrated best practice fail so completely even in this favourable context?

This paper addresses that question by presenting a case study of Georgia that applies the concept of isomorphic mimicry (IM), a phenomenon widely discussed in the literature,<sup>6</sup> to explain the failure of the RIA institutionalization reform. Using this illustrative case, the analysis demonstrates how reform – despite broad endorsement and substantial financial support from all relevant actors – can persist for years without delivering substantive outcomes and completely come to a halt after donor activities disappear. The analysis also demonstrates how the Georgian political bureaucracy managed to carry forward its usual *modus operandi* by further subverting the reform through the creation and exploitation of parallel instruments that limited its formal impact.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW, RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AND METHODOLOGY

### I. RIA institutionalization reforms in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Globally, the process of RIA institutionalization commenced in the mid-2000s when ma-

1 European Commission. (2015). Action document for support to public administration reform in Georgia (PAR); European Commission. (2017). Association agenda between the European Union and Georgia: 2017-2020.

2 The Administration of Government of Georgia. (2015). Public Administration Reform Guide 2020.

3 Initially, when the Government Administration was reviewed under the 2013 OECD/SIGMA assessment, one of the recommendations was to create this new structural unit. (Public Administration Reform Guide 2020, 2015).

4 See: <[www.sigmaweb.org/en/publications/the-principles-of-public-administration\\_7f5ec453-en.html](http://www.sigmaweb.org/en/publications/the-principles-of-public-administration_7f5ec453-en.html)>.

5 USAID – Governing for Growth (G4G) in Georgia. (2015). Recommendations on RIA national framework of Georgia.

6 Andrews, M., Pritchett, L., Woolcock, M. (2019). Building state capability: Evidence, analysis, action. Oxford University Press; Pritchett, L., Woolcock, M., Andrews, M. (2013). Looking like a state: Techniques of persistent failure in state capability for implementation. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 49(1), pp. 1-18.

for international organizations introduced this new policy planning tool. Subsequently, relevant standards, frameworks, and guidelines were developed, primarily by organizations such as the OECD, European Commission, World Bank, and other global actors.<sup>7</sup> At its core, RIA aims to foster evidence-based policymaking by ensuring that regulatory decisions are guided by systematic analysis. It seeks to guarantee that enacted regulations are economically rational – assessed through tools such as cost-benefit analysis – coherent with the broader policy framework, and socially as well as culturally acceptable to a diverse group of stakeholders. Thus, the institutionalization of RIA was actively promoted by various donors globally and readily embraced by certain countries seeking to attract donor funding and gain external legitimacy for their reform efforts.<sup>8</sup>

A review of the literature on the institutionalization of Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) in Eastern Europe and Central Asia reveals mixed findings. For instance, Staroňová (2010),<sup>9</sup> based on a comparative analysis of five Central European countries, concludes that the forms of institutionalization differ significantly, and the trajectories of reform development vary across countries. She argues that while the existence of high-quality RIA guidelines is an important prerequisite, it is not sufficient for successful implementation. Instead, the quality of oversight mechanisms is identified as a critical factor in determining reform success.

In a later study, Staroňová (2014)<sup>10</sup> examines

RIA implementation in Central and Eastern European countries and finds that the preparation of RIA documents tends to be symbolic or non-use in nature. A major problem identified is that when RIAs are conducted, they are often prepared at the final stage of policy formulation, rendering them largely ineffective in influencing decision-making.

Similarly, Shaikenova (2024),<sup>11</sup> in a comparative analysis of RIA implementation in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Georgia, finds that the quality of RIA documents does not improve over time; In fact, it tends to deteriorate. The study concludes that, in the examined countries, RIA reforms are largely superficial and implemented pro forma, with little substantive impact on the policy process.

## II. Public administration reform in Georgia

A review of the literature on PAR in Georgia suggests that overall reform outcomes have been moderate and that similar types of problems recur across different reform dimensions. Khuroshvili (2025)<sup>12</sup> argues that the policy-planning system only partially aligns with the SIGMA Principles; Georgia demonstrates relatively strong legislative coherence, yet weaknesses persist in evidence-based policymaking and inclusion. The review also identifies a misalignment between formal institutional design and practical implementation, as well as ongoing challenges related to administrative capacity and limited political will. Kvashilava (2019)<sup>13</sup> concludes that, both with respect to PAR in general and civil service reform in particular, success has largely depended on political will and the broader political context. Comparing the design of the civil service with its actual

7 OECD. (1997). Regulatory impact analysis: Best practices in OECD countries. <doi.org/10.1787/9789264162150-en>; OECD. (2008a). Building an institutional framework for regulatory impact analysis (RIA): Guidance for policy makers. <www.oecd.org/regreform/regulatory-policy/40984990.pdf>; OECD. (2008b). Introductory handbook for undertaking regulatory impact analysis (RIA). <http://www.oecd.org/gov/regulatory-policy/44789472.pdf>; OECD. (2015). Regulatory policy in perspective: A reader's companion to the OECD Regulatory Policy Outlook 2015. <dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264241800-en>.

8 Ibid.

9 Staroňová, K. (2010). Regulatory impact assessment: Formal institutionalization and practice. *Journal of Public Policy*, 30(1), pp. 117-136.

10 Staroňová, K. (2014). L'institutionnalisation des études d'impact en Europe centrale et orientale [In-

stitutionnalization of regulatory impact assessment in Central and Eastern Europe]. *Revue française d'administration publique*, 149(1), pp. 123-143.

11 Shaikenova, A. (2024). Regulatory impact assessment in Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Russia: Policy learning and policy capacity. Doctoral dissertation, Nazarbayev University.

12 Khuroshvili, B. (2025). The policy planning system in Georgia: design and implementation challenges, *Eastern Journal of European Studies*, 16(1), pp. 173-193.

13 Kvashilava, B. (2019). The political constraints for civil service reform in Georgia: History, current affairs, prospects and challenges. *Caucasus Survey*, 7(3), pp. 214-234.

operation, Khuroshvili (2023)<sup>14</sup> and Dolidze (2021)<sup>15</sup> report significant discrepancies in their respective studies. Finally, Abashidze (2016)<sup>16</sup> contends that civil service reform in Georgia was premature; more specifically, the state lacked the capacity to implement a reform of this magnitude effectively, which helps explain its shortcomings.

One might argue that the trajectory of RIA roll-out in Georgia mirrors patterns observed both in neighbouring countries' RIA reforms and in Georgia's PAR more generally. More specifically, insufficient political will, limited state capacity, design flaws in institutionalization, and a misalignment between policy design and practical implementation contributed to the reform's shortcomings.

At the same time, given that the reform ostensibly enjoyed full political backing, Georgia's overall governance capacity was comparatively strong, as indicated by the World Governance Indicators (WGI) Government Effectiveness measure, where in 2023 Georgia ranked second after Czechia among Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia, and the reform had overarching donor support, an essential factor in strengthening state capacity, there may be more at play than the foregoing explanations alone. In other words, the process development under the RIA institutionalization in Georgia may have been deliberate and strategic, with outcomes that in fact reflect the state's intended objectives. To address this question, the author presents a case study of Georgia that applies the concept of isomorphic mimicry (IM), a phenomenon widely discussed in the literature,<sup>17</sup> to explain the failure of the RIA institutionalization reform.

### III. What is isomorphic mimicry (IM)?

In line with development literature, there is a global movement where donors typically engage in formulating global themes and their corresponding scripts.<sup>18</sup> Simultaneously, in pursuit of their objectives, donors seek fertile ground, tools, and techniques in various developing countries.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, when a country aims to look like a state and project the image of a successful entity, it often employs the phenomenon/technique of IM. This entails the state's willingness to undertake agenda-confirming reforms to gain internal and external legitimacy, assuming that its shortcomings will be tolerated by external observers (the so-called "successful failures"). Frequently, the IM strategy leads the state to take an excessive burden prematurely (the so-called "premature load-bearing phenomenon"), and ultimately, it becomes trapped in what is known as the capability trap. Escaping this trap and transforming a particular reform into a genuine success then becomes extremely challenging.<sup>20</sup>

The concept of IM builds on the broader notion of institutional isomorphism.<sup>21</sup> DiMaggio and Powell (1983)<sup>22</sup> distinguish three main forms of institutional isomorphism: coercive, normative, and mimetic. As their original models focused on industrial relations, the concept initially belonged more to the field of industrial sociology. By contrast, IM has evolved into an approach more closely aligned with international development.

14 Khuroshvili, B. (2023). Civil Service System in Georgia and its features following the Public Administration Reform. *Environment and Society*, #8 July, pp. 1-18.

15 Dolidze, N. (2021). Principle of accountability and establishment of politically neutral civil service in Georgia. Paper presented at the 29<sup>th</sup> NISPACEE Annual Conference.

16 Abashidze, A. (2016). Civil Service Reform in Georgia: Main Directions and Challenges. Doctoral Dissertation, Ilia State University.

17 Andrews, M., Pritchett, L., Woolcock, M. (2019). *Building state capability: Evidence, analysis, action*. Oxford University Press; Pritchett, L., Woolcock, M., Andrews, M. (2013). *Looking like a state: Techniques of persistent failure in state capability for implementation*. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 49(1), pp. 1-18.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 For detailed discussion of IM see: Andrews, M., Pritchett, L., Woolcock, M. (2019). *Building state capability: Evidence, analysis, action*. Oxford University Press; Pritchett, L., Woolcock, M., Andrews, M. (2013). *Looking like a state: Techniques of persistent failure in state capability for implementation*. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 49(1), pp. 1-18.

21 DiMaggio, P. J., Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), pp. 147-160; Powell, W. W., DiMaggio, P. J. (Eds.). (1991). *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis*. University of Chicago Press.

22 DiMaggio, P. J., Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), pp. 147-160.

Its practical application expanded particularly in developing countries and their institutions from the late 1980s onward. This shift was largely driven by the growing emphasis on the quality of public institutions within the development discourse.<sup>23</sup>

Andrews et al. (2017) illustrate an organizational ecosystem in which IM is optimal. Precisely, such an ecosystem consists of three layers (ecosystem, organization, and agents). To make IM work effectively, the ecosystem for organizations should be a closed system, and agenda conformity should be a criterion for how novelty is evaluated. The optimal form for organizational legitimisation should be IM, leaders of organizations should choose organizational perpetuation as their preferred strategy, and the so-called front-line workers should act with pure self-interest.<sup>24</sup>

#### IV. Literature review on IM

The cases of IM have been actively studied academically, both globally but also in the post-Soviet context. For instance, Narzetti & Marques (2021)<sup>25</sup> examine water sector reforms in Brazil and conclude that IM was the main reason for the failure to achieve meaningful success. Similarly, Bano (2022)<sup>26</sup> studies education reforms in Nigeria and argues that the adoption of international best practices facilitated mimicry, enabling the government to signal alignment with global standards without generating real progress. IM is also salient in the implementation of global initiatives. For example, Rubin and Munkholm (2022)<sup>27</sup> analyze the formulation of National Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) Plans, concluding that in many low – and middle-income countries, the formal adoption of WHO templates occurred without substan-

tive implementation, a phenomenon largely attributed to IM.

In the post-Soviet context, Janenova & Knox (2019)<sup>28</sup> explore the civil service law in Kazakhstan, concluding that the reform process was largely mimicry-driven. Similarly, Janenova (2019)<sup>29</sup> investigates education reforms in Central Asia and identifies widespread adoption of Western models and forms in a mimetic manner. In another study, Knox & Janenova (2019)<sup>30</sup> examine Kazakhstan's E-governance reforms, coining the term "E-Governance Paradox" to describe a situation where digital platforms create a façade of progress. This logic extends to open government reforms, where Kazakhstan's model of "half-open government" is presented as an example of mimicry.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Kurmanov & Knox (2022)<sup>32</sup> reach comparable conclusions based on the cases of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. In the realm of higher education, Bischof (2018)<sup>33</sup> examines reforms in Moldova, Russia, and Kazakhstan, documenting a mimetic convergence toward the Bologna Process, which the author refers to as "partial mimicry". In the field of policing strategies – particularly the implementation of the "broken windows" approach in Almaty (Kazakhstan) and Kyiv (Ukraine) – Marat (2018)<sup>34</sup> highlights the mimetic character

23 Andrews, M., Pritchett, L., Woolcock, M. (2019). *Building state capability: Evidence, analysis, action*. Oxford University Press.

24 Ibid., pp. 32-33.

25 Narzetti, D. A., Marques, R. C. (2021). Isomorphic mimicry and the effectiveness of water-sector reforms in Brazil. *Utilities Policy*, p. 70.

26 Bano, M. (2022). International push for SBMCs and the problem of isomorphic mimicry: Evidence from Nigeria. *RISE Working Paper Series (22/102)*. Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

27 Rubin, O., Munkholm, L. (2022). Isomorphic dynamics in national action plans on antimicrobial resistance. *Public Administration and Development*, 42(2), pp. 142-153.

28 Janenova, S., Knox, C. (2017). Civil service reform in Kazakhstan: Trajectory to the 30 most developed countries? *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 85(3).

29 Janenova, S. (2019). Public administration academies in Central Asia: "Government puppets" or independent seats of learning? *Teaching Public Administration*, 38(2).

30 Knox, C., Janenova, S. (2019). The e-government paradox in post-Soviet countries. *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 32(6), pp. 600-615.

31 O'Connor, K., Janenova, S., Knox, C. (2019). Open government in authoritarian regimes. *International Review of Public Policy*, 1(1), pp. 65-83.

32 Kurmanov, B., Knox, C. (2022). Open government and citizen empowerment in authoritarian states. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 13(2), pp. 156-171.

33 Bischof, L. (2018). Effects of the Bologna Process on quality assurance regimes in the post-Soviet space: Isomorphism and path dependencies in Moldova, Russia, and Kazakhstan. In *European Higher Education Area: The impact of past and future policies*. Springer, pp. 77-93.

34 Marat, E. (2018). Mimicking "broken windows" policing in post-Soviet cities: Expanding social con-

of these strategies' adoption.

Given that IM largely rests on the country and its international partners acting in concert, the next section offers a concise survey of the modalities of interdependence between Georgia and its international counterparts in contemporary Georgian history, spanning the early 1990s through the early 2020s.

### V. Georgia as a "Donor Darling"

In the recent history of Georgia, after the fall of the Soviet Union, following the tumultuous experiences of the early 1990s,<sup>35</sup> Georgia, starting in the mid-1990s, began to look outward, seeking models of economic, political, and institutional reform to adopt. Over time, Georgia earned a reputation as a "donor darling", eager to implement various modernist institutional experiments imported from abroad.<sup>36,37</sup>

During Shevardnadze's government period (1992-2003), he sought to utilize pro-Western reform orientations for the purpose of self-legitimization, drawing upon his political background

in communism. This effort led to the appointment of young, foreign-educated individuals to prominent positions, making the application of institutional reforms more convincing to international partners.<sup>38</sup> Next, Mikheil Saakashvili, upon assuming power in 2003 and until 2012, also attempted to employ the western reform agenda to bolster his internal legitimacy, portray himself as a western-inspired reform-oriented leader, and thus secure much-needed financial and political support from western partners. However, simultaneously, Saakashvili engaged in local experiments. This occurred when, with the support of international partners, the Saakashvili government pursued reforms that usually conflicted with the standard approaches, recommendations, and conditions typically advanced by donors.<sup>39</sup> Ultimately, the Saakashvili government team faced a significant political setback largely due to these experiments, which extended beyond the basic framework of donor-driven reform agenda conformity and became exceedingly difficult to manage without a strong institutional backbone, external legitimization, and diminishing public support.<sup>40</sup>

trol in uncertain times. *Policing and Society*, 29(9), pp. 1005-1021.

35 For detailed discussion see: Suny, R. (1994). *The making of the Georgian nation* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Indiana University Press; Jones, S. (2023). *Georgia: A political history since independence*. I. B. Tauris; Shvelidze, D. (2021). *Political confrontations and the overthrow of the national government in Georgia (1987-1992)*. Artanuji Publishing.

36 For detailed discussion see: Christophe, B. (2001). *Transformation als Inszenierung – Zur institutionellen und kulturellen Einbettung von Korruption in Georgien*. In Höhmann, H.-H. (Ed.). *Kultur als Bestimmungsfaktor der Transformation im Osten Europas*. Bremen-Temmen, pp. 157-175; Christophe, B. (2005, September 23-24). *From hybrid regime to hybrid capitalism? The political economy of Georgia under Eduard Shevardnadze*. Conference presentation, University of Paisley; Christophe, B. (2007). *Georgia: Capitalism as organized chaos*. In Bruszt, L., Roland, G. (Eds.). *Varieties of capitalism in post-communist countries*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 183-200; European Commission. (2022). *Evaluation of the EU's cooperation with Georgia: Final report, Volume I – Main report*; World Bank. (2012). *Fighting corruption in public services: Chronicling Georgia's reforms*. World Bank.

37 Christophe called this process an "organized chaos" and compared the process of state transformation to staging.

38 For detailed discussion see: Furusawa, T. (2022). *Shevardnadze's paper tiger: A fragile ruling party and the Rose Revolution*. *Japanese Slavic and East European Studies*, 42, pp. 17-34; Chiaberashvili, Z., Tevzadze, G. (2005). *Power elites in Georgia: Old and new*. In Fluri, P. H., Cole, E. (Eds.). *From revolution to reform: Georgia's struggle with democratic institution building and security sector reform*. Bureau for Security Policy at the Austrian Ministry of Defense & Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, pp. 187-207; De Waal, T. (2019). *The Caucasus: An introduction* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Oxford University Press.

39 Engvall, J. (2012). *Against the grain: How Georgia fought corruption and what it means*. Silk Road Paper. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program.

40 For detailed discussion see: Rekhviashvili, L. (2013). *Development and the role of the state: Visions of post-revolutionary Georgian government*. *Caucasus Social Science Review*, 1(1), pp. 1-20; Dobbins, M. (2014). *The post-Rose Revolution reforms as a case of misguided policy transfer and accidental democratisation?* *Europe-Asia Studies*, 66(5), pp. 759-774; Berglund, C. (2014). *Georgia between dominant-power politics, feckless pluralism, and democracy*. *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 22(3), pp. 445-470; Khishtovani, G. (2016). *Transformation von Gover-*

A new political order was established in Georgia in 2012. This order emerged after the Georgian population managed rather unexpected to change the government through the parliamentary elections in 2012, bringing the Georgian Dream party into power.<sup>41</sup> Retrospectively, we can argue that Georgian Dream lacked an ideological backbone, had no clearly articulated reform agenda, was characterized by inertia, was built fundamentally as the antithesis of the Saakashvili regime, and its governance was characterized by strong elements of informal rule – stemming from the fact that its founder, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, exercised power in an informal capacity.<sup>42</sup> Once this primary goal of becoming a ruling party was achieved, its ideological void became apparent and urgently needed to be filled. Meanwhile, inertia demanded that Georgian Dream demonstrate reform initiatives. However, the short-term orientation of its constantly changing formal leadership made long-term planning virtually impossible (Notably, during the ten-year period of Georgian Dream's governance, from 2012 to 2022, there were six in-

stances where the current prime minister unexpectedly resigned, resulting in the dissolution of the government). These conditions, combined with the signing of the Association Agreement with the EU in 2014 and the assumption of new commitments within the process of Georgia's EU integration,<sup>43</sup> laid the groundwork for presenting so-called good governance reforms as a panacea and provided international donors with an even broader arena for advancing the reform agenda in Georgia.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, the Georgian Dream government exhibited a willingness to undertake agenda-confirming reforms at the expense of foreign donors. As a result, within the governance model, the role and significance of additional actors involved in policy development – primarily multilateral and bilateral donors, as well as the profit and non-profit non-governmental sector closely associated with them – increased and eventually became the dominant feature.

To see the increased scale of international partners' activities in Georgia, several data points can be cited. According to official figures, development partners committed approximately USD 2.3 billion in 2006 and around USD 9.5 billion in 2019, representing a fourfold increase (World Bank, 2025).<sup>45</sup> At the same time, the total funding commitments of the top ten development partners between 2014 and 2021 amounted to approximately USD 14.45 billion. For comparison, Georgia's annual GDP stood at USD 17.9 billion in 2014 and USD 18.4 billion in 2021 (World Bank, 2023).<sup>46</sup> As for the activities of a specific country and organization in Georgia, here, for example, we can look at the work

nance-Strukturen in Georgien, 2003–2012. Verlag Dr. Kovac; Timm, C. (2013). Economic regulation and state interventions: Georgia's move from neo-liberalism to state-managed capitalism. PFH Forschungspapiere, 2013/03.

41 For detailed discussion see: Broers, L. (2013). Recognising politics in unrecognised states: 20 years of enquiry into the de facto states of the South Caucasus. *Caucasus Survey*, 1(1), pp. 59-74; Fairbanks, C. H., Jr. (2004). Georgia's Rose Revolution. *Journal of Democracy*, 15(2), pp. 110-124; Dobbins, M. (2014). The post-Rose Revolution reforms as a case of misguided policy transfer and accidental democratisation? *Europe-Asia Studies*, 66(5), pp. 759-774.

42 For detailed discussion see: Kakachia, K., Lebanidze, B., Larsen, J., Grigalashvili, M. (2017). The first 100 days of the Georgian Dream government: A reality check. *GIP Policy Report*; O'Connor, K., Janenova, S., Knox, C. (2019). Open government in authoritarian regimes. *International Review of Public Policy*, 1(1), pp. 65-83; Kukava, K. (2022). Democratisation and political transformation in Georgia. In Leontiev, L., Amarasinghe, P. (Eds.). *State-building, rule of law, good governance and human rights in post-Soviet space: Thirty years looking back*. Routledge; Berglund, C. (2014). *Georgia between dominant-power politics, feckless pluralism, and democracy*. *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 22(3), pp. 445-470.

43 Council of the European Union. (2014). Joint press release following the first Association Council meeting between the European Union and Georgia [Press release]; European Commission. (2014). Action document for support to EU-Georgia DCFTA and SMEs.

44 European Commission. (2015). Action document for support to public administration reform in Georgia (PAR); European Commission. (2017). Association agenda between the European Union and Georgia: 2017-2020.

45 World Bank. (2025). *The World Bank in Georgia, 2014-2023: Country program evaluation*. World Bank.

46 World Bank. (2023). *The World Bank in Georgia, 2014-2023: Country program evaluation, approach paper*. World Bank.

of the U.S. and the Asian Development Bank. Between 2012 and 2023, the United States disbursed approximately \$1.92 billion in Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) to Georgia. On a per capita basis, this represents one of the highest aid levels globally (ForeignAssistance.Gov, 2025; Devdariani, 2025).<sup>47</sup> To understand the scale of assistance, it is also useful to situate Georgia within the regional context of U.S. foreign assistance. In 2022, Georgia ranked second – after Ukraine – in terms of U.S. assistance within the Europe and Eurasia region, which includes a total of 20 countries. This position was held throughout most of the 2012–2022 period. In the case of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Georgia has witnessed substantial cumulative growth in commitments over the past two decades. While total commitments stood at under USD 200 million in 2006, they had reached approximately USD 2 billion by 2019. By the end of 2021, the total had increased to USD 2.95 billion (The World Bank, 2025).<sup>48</sup>

## VI. Research questions and methodology

All the above-mentioned circumstances favoured the introduction and successful implementation of globally recognized good governance practices in Georgia after 2012. Nevertheless, one of the flagship initiatives of this process – the reform aimed at institutionalizing Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) – ultimately failed. In this article, we seek to explain the reasons for this failure, employing the IM framework as our theoretical lens. The following research questions will be addressed using a case study:

RQ1: To what extent is Georgia's IM strategy an explanatory factor behind the failure of Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) reform?

RQ2: To what extent did donors contribute to the persistence of IM in Georgia?

RQ3: Has the actual governance model deployed any practices, in parallel, to hedge against the risk of dysfunction while mimetic reforms

were being implemented?

To answer this question, this article traces the entire RIA institutionalization reform process across four phases: inception, renewed momentum, legislative breakthrough, and rapid decline. The case study draws on a comprehensive review of all relevant documents, supplemented by in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted with various stakeholders involved in the reform process, including its initiators, RIA experts, RIA authors, and policy analysts in Georgia.

## 2. CASE STUDY – RIA INSTITUTIONALIZATION REFORM IN GEORGIA

The ultimate objective of the RIA institutionalization reform in Georgia was to mandate the Government and Parliament of Georgia to conduct RIAs before the adoption of significant regulatory changes. In the following section, I outline the process of RIA institutionalization and highlight its key milestones.

### Phase 1: Inception

The discussion around RIA in Georgia first emerged in 2007 when the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development established a dedicated unit, the Division of Economic Policy and Regulation Impact Assessment (KII #1, 2023). During the period from 2007 to 2012, owing to the libertarian approach of the government at the time, the issue of RIA gradually lost its relevance in the following years, despite the continued practice of conducting small-scale on-site assessments (KII #1, 2023). At the same time, capacity building initiatives were sporadically launched for the relevant government units and other stakeholders, including research institutes and consultancy organizations.<sup>49</sup>

### Phase 2: The renewed momentum

After a hiatus of several years, discussions about RIA in Georgia regained momentum around 2014–2015. The framework document prepared

<sup>47</sup> Devdariani, J. (2025, March). As USAID dies, many of Georgia's "vibrant" CSOs face extinction. *GEOPolitics: Journal of Political Commentary in the Caucasus*; ForeignAssistance.gov: <[www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/georgia/2023/obligations/1](http://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/georgia/2023/obligations/1)>.

<sup>48</sup> World Bank. (2025). *The World Bank in Georgia, 2014–2023: Country program evaluation*. World Bank.

<sup>49</sup> USAID – Governing for Growth (G4G) in Georgia. (2015). *Recommendations on RIA national framework of Georgia*.

by the USAID (United States Agency for International Development) Economic Governance Program (G4G) – Recommendations on RIA National Framework of Georgia – in 2015 was the very first public document discussing the institutional reform framework of RIA in Georgia. As the report notes, before this, RIA in Georgia mainly consisted of ad-hoc events designed to raise awareness among public agencies and enhance stakeholders' RIA-related skills. During the same period, work on pilot RIA documents commenced, with the first three being prepared in 2014. The first official government document to address institutional reform was the "Strategy for the Systematic Reform of Policy Planning (2015-2017)," approved in June 2015. According to this strategy, the government committed to incorporating the RIA methodology into Georgian legislation. The action plan stipulated that this should be achieved no later than 2017, with the Department of Policy Analysis, Strategic Planning, and Coordination of the Prime Minister's Office tasked with developing the reform.<sup>50</sup> Subsequently, the reform process came to a halt for several years. This pause can likely be attributed to the conclusion of the relevant donor-funded project (G4G) and/or a shift in priorities. Specifically, after the development of the corresponding strategic document and the establishment of the designated governmental unit, most probably, donor interest declined, while parallel, the reform lacked the internal readiness to continue. Following this hiatus, around 2017, the reform regained momentum.

### Phase 3: The legislative breakthrough

Between 2017 and 2019, two parallel processes unfolded. On one hand, as described above, there was a significant stagnation in terms of institutional reform, with the plans initiated in 2014-2015 largely faltering. On the other hand, a new trend emerged as new donors, such as the USAID Good Governance Initiative and the USAID Energy Program, became more actively involved in the RIA institutionalization process. Various international organizations, including GIZ (German Society for International Cooperation), UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), and UN Women, also took initiatives, contributing to the preparation of

pilot RIA documents and strengthening the relevant human resources. Notably, 2019 witnessed the highest number of prepared RIA documents, with 12 in total.<sup>51</sup>

The events of 2019-2020 mark a critical stage in the RIA institutionalization reform in Georgia. In May 2019, the Parliament of Georgia approved amendments to the Law on Normative Acts. These amendments mandated attaching an RIA report to draft normative acts, but it's worth noting that the legislative amendment already defined exceptions, allowing initiators to bypass RIA preparation. Another significant date was January 17, 2020, when Government Resolution 35 and related annexes were approved. These documents established the methodological framework for RIA implementation and outlined a list of legislative acts requiring mandatory RIA inclusion when drafting amendments. It's essential to acknowledge that various donors played a substantial role in initiating and technically supporting this process (KII #2, 2023).

RIA's experts note that, alongside the active engagement of donors, a significant driver of change was the prevailing trend of governmental reforms at the time. As one former public official remarked during a focus group discussion, there was both hope and an expectation among the officials driving the reform that, when a reform-minded minister eventually assumed office, they would encounter, on the one hand, an established legislative framework and, on the other, a well-prepared civil service (FGD #1 with RIA-experts, 2023).

### Phase 4: Initial euphoria and sudden decline

The final phase of the RIA institutionalization reform began with initial euphoria but ended in a sudden decline.

The euphoria followed a legislative breakthrough, as stakeholders were eager to advance policy implementation and actively sought to establish an optimal institutional framework to ensure its effectiveness. During the period of 2021-2023, several significant processes have occurred. Elements of the RIA institutionalization reform were incorporated into strategic documents and action plans. More specifically, in 2022, the ap-

50 Ibid.

51 ISET Policy Institute. (2023). RIA institutionalization reform assessment report.

proval of the 2023-2026 Public Administration Reform (PAR) strategy featured an entry concerning RIA. Notably, this reference is somewhat vague and primarily focuses on the retraining of civil servants. Interestingly, the strategy attempts to justify the relatively slow progress of RIA reform by citing the global pandemic. Also, the SME Development Strategy 2021-2025, adopted in 2021, places a strong emphasis on legislative development, institutional strengthening, and the enhancement of the operating environment. Within this framework, the strategy supports the development of the RIA system, which includes the implementation of the RIA SME test for legislative changes, with consideration given to EU and international best practices.

At the same time, various implementing units responsible for the RIA institutionalization reform were established and strengthened. Notably, alongside the process of RIA institutionalization, there was an ongoing effort to strengthen RIA-related skills. However, on the one hand, there was no comprehensive overview of the skills that civil servants have been able to enhance during this period.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, all relevant stakeholders were concerned about the lack of human resources and the constant outflow of personnel from the public service, which hinders the achievement of reform goals (KII #1, 2023; FDG #2 with RIA-authors, 2023). They consistently emphasized the importance of continued donor support for capacity-building programs.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, at the legislative level, it was determined that the Parliamentary Secretary of the Government of Georgia (Secretary) would oversee the study of draft laws and the attached RIA reports, assessing their quality. With support from the USAID EG Program, a decision was made to establish the RIA Support Platform at the Secretary (the host organization). Under this platform, when the state agency identifies the need for the RIA preparation and receives appropriate support, it can request assistance from the Secretary. The Secretary then engages RIA experts affiliated with the platform. The program identified three experts for this purpose. One of these experts was responsible for

determining the extent of assistance required for RIA preparation, the type of RIA to be implemented, and the nature of the support provided. From May 2022 to August 2023, within the platform's activities, RIA experts participated in the preparation of a single RIA report. In 2023, work was underway to draft the second RIA document.<sup>54</sup>

The second initiative, supported by the USAID EG Program and the Secretary, was the RIA Peer-review Platform. In the initial stage, the program developed the concept and structure of the quality control platform. In 2023, the RIA report quality control guidebook was created, aligning with the RIA preparation methodology defined by government decree. The plan was for this document to become informally mandatory during RIA quality assessments. The USAID EG program was planning to assist the office by providing expert support. The initiative involves two independent experts and one government representative assessing the quality of the RIA document.<sup>55</sup>

Parallely, in 2022, the Research Center of the Parliament of Georgia expressed its willingness to contribute to RIA institutionalization reform. Consequently, in 2023, its mandate was expanded following relevant changes in the center's statute, preparing RIA-related documents as part of the center's responsibilities. The Parliamentary Budget Office expressed similar interest, particularly in enhancing skills related to the Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) methodology.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, there is the Economic Policy and Regulation Impact Assessment Division, which operates as a structural unit of the Economic Policy Department within the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development. In 2023, with active participation and funding from UNDP, there was an initiative underway to prepare the SME Test methodology and implement it in practice.

The changes outlined above were accompanied by the introduction of new methodologies, guidelines, and regulatory initiatives associated with the RIA institutionalization reform. These included the completion and refinement of various methodologies – such as the RIA methodology

52 ISET Policy Institute. (2023). RIA institutionalization reform assessment report.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 ISET Policy Institute. (2023). RIA institutionalization reform assessment report.

56 Ibid.

(pursuant to Government of Georgia Resolution No. 35), the standard and in-depth RIA methodologies, the SME test methodology, and the RIA quality assurance methodology/guidebook. In addition, a number of guidebook-style documents were prepared, including publications on cost-benefit analysis developed specifically by the Parliamentary Budget Office. Moreover, several new regulatory initiatives were launched within the framework of the RIA institutionalization reform. A notable example was the RIA Implementation Expert Certification, presented by industry experts at the USAID EG event in March 2023.

The initiatives described above were unexpectedly suspended in 2024. More concretely, following the Georgian government's confrontation with the European Union and the United States in early 2024 – during which it accused them, among others, of orchestrating a revolution in Georgia – the EU and the U.S. responded by suspending cooperation with public institutions under their donor-funded initiatives.<sup>57</sup> As a result, the RIA reform in Georgia effectively came to an end. All donor initiatives were halted, and public institutions ceased their independent engagement in the reform process.

### 3. RESULTS

In response to RQ1, the process-tracing analysis leads us to a finding that the institutionalization of the RIA reform in Georgia followed the inherent logic of the IM framework. Georgia was initially unprepared for the significant burden it assumed (the “premature load-bearing phenomenon”), which gradually led the public service into a capability trap. For instance, the inclusion of RIA-related issues in state strategies and action plans, the expansion of the mandate of existing units, the development of new methodological approaches and relevant guidelines, and the initiation of other regulatory innovations have laid the foundation for an irreversible process

of deepening the skills gap in the public service (for instance, in this case study, the initiative to assign the task of RIA quality control to the employees of the Office of the Parliamentary Secretary of the Government of Georgia placed a significant institutional burden on the office (FGD #1 with RIA-experts, 2023). This has made their daily work more challenging and the reform implementation process less likely to succeed. At the same time, for the public service to escape this capability trap into which it had placed itself – and to fulfil all the commitments it had undertaken at the normative level – it required ever-increasing and continuous donor support. In response, both donors and technical assistance providers (private/non-governmental organizations, individual experts) were eager to offer new services, and as described above, they continuously developed new initiatives and tools for this purpose. From a theoretical perspective, this implied that escaping this trap and making a particular reform successful became nearly impossible.

To further illustrate the mimicry nature of the reform, it is instructive to examine its outcomes. Following the significant changes adopted at the beginning of 2020, by September 2023, the Georgian government had not submitted a single RIA report to the Parliament of Georgia regarding changes initiated in the laws determined by government decree.<sup>58</sup>

Regarding RQ2, the mimicry-based nature of the reform and its total dependence on donor engagement became evident in its de facto termination: once donor initiatives were halted in 2024, public institutions completely ceased their independent engagement in the RIA institutionalization process. As a result, the RIA reform in Georgia effectively came to an end.

In response to RQ3, it is noteworthy that the reform failed to affect the current governance model; alongside the formal endorsement of the reform, the political bureaucracy managed to maintain the usual *modus operandi* by creating and leveraging various regulatory tools. This was achieved through legislative initiatives that created so-called legislative loopholes. To illustrate, the initial legislative change allowed bills initiat-

<sup>57</sup> For details see: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2024, July 9). EU halts Georgia's accession to the bloc, freezes financial aid over much-criticized law; Politico. (2024, November 30). US suspends strategic partnership with Georgia after EU membership talks halted. Politico.

<sup>58</sup> ISET Policy Institute. (2023). RIA institutionalization reform assessment report.

ed by parliamentarians to bypass the mandatory use of RIA. The decree also includes a provision stating that, under certain circumstances, delays in legislative changes are considered unjustified, and therefore, the preparation of a RIA is not required for such changes. In practice, those loopholes have become an important mechanism for implementing regulatory changes outside the formal scope of the reform. According to an analysis conducted by ISET-PI in 2023, between 2022 and September 2023, three such legislative initiatives were introduced by ruling party parliamentarians (In a KII #2, RIA expert aptly referred to these initiators as “volunteer parliamentarians”). In an additional three cases, the Government of Georgia justified the absence of RIA by citing the lack of justification for the delay. As one of the focus group participants clearly stated, whenever an initiative of importance to the government was at stake, it was implemented through exceptions, bypassing the RIA process (FGD #1 with RIA-experts, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

Using the example of Georgian RIA institutionalization reform, we can conclude that a classical type of IM can be observed. It was characterized by the following:

- Firstly, all relevant stakeholders contributed to the viability and sustained perpetuation of mimicry-driven reforms, despite the lack of substantive results. Specifically: 1) Within the political bureaucracy, there was a continued formal endorsement of the reform process; 2) Donors continued to advance the reform process, thereby contributing to its de facto legitimization. 3) Opportunism was displayed by the reform implementers, both at the institutional (at both the state and private) and individual levels, aligning with their own interests. In some cases, this involved staying engaged in the reform process to maintain, strengthen, or assign a formal purpose to the respective institution. In other cases, it involves pursuing individual benefits.

More specifically, in exchange for short-term benefits, technical supporters of the reform, such as experts, consulting groups, and research centers, often unknowingly facilitated the acceleration of the IM process;

- Secondly, the reform gradually led the public service into a capability trap, from which escape required ever-increasing and continuous donor support;
- Thirdly, in the absence of an exogenous shock – specifically, the abrupt discontinuation of donor initiatives in cooperation with state entities in Georgia in 2024 – there was a strong likelihood that the mimicry-driven reform process would have persisted indefinitely, sustained by the active contribution of all relevant stakeholders.

At the same time, the suspension of activities by relevant international donors in Georgia effectively created a natural experiment – specifically, the opportunity to assess the extent to which the reform could prove sustainable in the complete absence of donor support. In other words, what was the scale of IM within the framework of the reform? The outcome was clear: once donor initiatives ceased, public institutions entirely discontinued their independent engagement in the RIA institutionalization process. Consequently, after donors abandoned the process, the RIA reform in Georgia effectively came to an end.

Simultaneously, the RIA institutionalization reform has revealed the existence of an effective political bureaucracy within the Georgian governance model and its systemic response to IM. This became evident when, during the ongoing reform, the previously unforeseen risk of transitioning from IM to significant systemic changes emerged. It demonstrated the ability of the system to accurately perceive the risks of IM and react accordingly to prevent systemic collapse. Precisely, parallel to a continued formal endorsement of the reform process, a de facto imitation of reform through the exploitation of various legislative loopholes took place, designed to prevent it from producing substantive results. This dual strategy ensured that the reform did not disrupt the stable functioning of the existing governance model.

This study advances scholarship on Isomor-

phic Mimicry and governance reforms in three respects. First, it specifies the organizational and ecosystemic conditions under which Isomorphic Mimicry is sustained – high donor density, a well-developed system of external and internal reform enablers, and bureaucratic hedging via legislative loopholes. Second, it identifies concrete

mechanisms of decoupling in the regulatory domain, turning RIA from a real decision-making instrument into a box-ticking exercise. Third, methodologically, the analysis exploits an exogenous suspension of donor cooperation in Georgia as a stress test, delineating the significance of donor engagement within a mimetic reform framework.

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